

Book Review: Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century by Kate Eichhorn

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In Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century, Kate Eichhorn tells the story of how the xerographic copier or 'xerox machine' became a key medium for artists and activists in the latter half of the twentieth century. This is a compelling and well-researched book that offers vivid examples of the deep political significance that became attached to these concrete acts of reproduction and dissemination, writes Yin Ho.

Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century. Kate Eichhorn. MIT Press. 2016.

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Adjusted Margin, the title of Kate Eichhorn's new book on how xerography's off-label use has impacted culture in the last quarter of the twentieth century, refers to the specific possible action of shifting the visible boundaries of a page. Reframing a copy also hints at other active forms of editing that can occur that might engage the copy machine in expanded ways. Using this potential as a conceptual starting point, *Adjusted Margin: Xerography, Art and Activism in the Late Twentieth Century* provides instances of where the medium was instrumental to the outcome – from the aftermath of 9/11 to New York during the hushed HIV/AIDS era – and where the acts of reproduction and dissemination had distinctly political overtones.

There are tales of copy shops on the fringes of academia, most notably Best Copy in Toronto, which was owned by a relative of Nabil al-Marabh, a suspect in the 9/11 investigations. The copy shop was raided by authorities one night in September 2001, and its machines seized with the justification that al-Marabh had once worked there. That some of those machines could laminate cards and reproduce originals somehow aided in making the case to the public that al-Marabh, a former counter worker, was a terrorist. Eichhorn points out that these 24-hour places have often been the setting for mildly illicit activities due to the nature of the possible operations: fake IDs, sure, but also copyrighted materials scanned en masse while universities looked the other way. Indeed, the shadow economy of photocopied academic texts became necessary in light of educational budget reductions and the introduction of the permanent adjunct into academia's foundations.

There were so many things xerography could image: butts, boobs, forms and, crucially, information. Eichhorn vividly describes xerography's place in the urban landscape of punk flyers in downtowns, effectively connecting them with the creation of an aesthetic with non-consumerist roots. However, most powerful is her chapter on how xerography worked as a necessary support in the HIV/AIDS movement. Given a labyrinthine health care system made even less transparent by the lack of a cure for the outbreak, Eichhorn demonstrates how vital these machines were in widening the net of the informed and in drawing together a community. ACT UP, or the AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power, was a driving force behind changing the conversation around HIV/AIDS, and in fighting against silence with their own copy machine. There were posters, beautifully and simply designed to educate ('Men use condoms or beat it' and 'Silence = death'), plastered around relevant neighbourhoods. Also papered were meeting times and news; with the mainstream media providing little reporting on the crisis, these xeroxed postings acted as a lifeline to awareness.

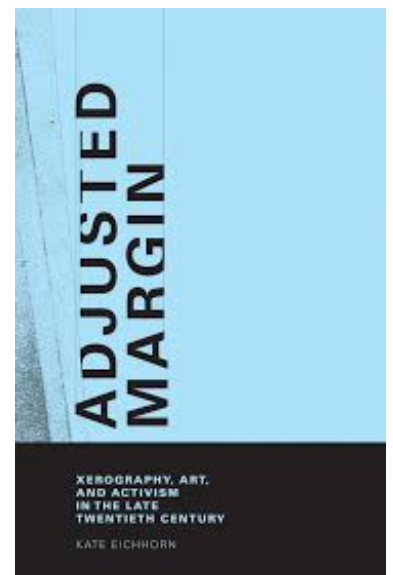




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The agency of information, coupled with the right governmental form, was powerful. When Medicaid imposed ‘utilization thresholds’ to limit the number of doctor visits allowed, ACT UP and other groups lobbied for an override for patients with chronic illnesses, like cancer and HIV/AIDS, to be permitted to continue seeking care. As many doctors were unaware of the exception, the physician’s or hospital’s office might not even have the override form to sign. ACT UP copied and disseminated them to their community. Producing the form gave patients some agency. And, because the override could be copied, these pieces of paper did not need to be individually cherished or rationed; instead, they could be distributed and shared.

Making multiples was an idealistic and effective way of countering individualism and competition. Though the copy machine may have actively sought to displace female office workers – Eichhorn introduces ads which compared the cost of ‘your office girl’ typing out a duplicate to the cost of a xeroxed copy – it also held the promise implied by industrial machines: that it could free a human from mindless repetition and, in its potentiality, allow for an equalisation of distribution. As Eichhorn discusses counterpublics and publics, she draws a line between acceptable and less acceptable usages of copying. Acceptable included office work; less acceptable were flyers, especially those posted to ‘blight’ commercial developments or city centres. Even in the age of the internet, post-it boards and papered lamp posts still worked, especially when site-specific. At Zuccotti Park during Occupy, muster points were disclosed via passed notes, middle-school style, in order to elude authorities who might prevent the gatherings.

Eichhorn discusses zines, independently produced, non-glossy, usually B&W magazines. The copy machine made it possible to make something, reproduce it and put it in the world without having to go through the gatekeepers of cultural content. In the days before every store had an internet presence, I recall writing and ordering records through zines bought from the specific store where the owner had a good ear to the ground for culture. Exposure then to what was happening in a like-minded but non-local universe was a physical source who curated content. Discoveries had fewer jumps down the rabbit hole simply because each leap wasn’t a linked click away.

The chapters, while tightly written, do tend towards repetition, perhaps through the fault of the medium they discuss. Xerography during this time period was pervasive enough to be invisible. Similar to writing a book on the salt trade or the printing press (another mechanical invention with incredible cultural significance that Eichhorn parallels to the copy machine), copy machines touched many aspects of life. The artist-activists who commandeered this tool saw it

as the most obvious workhorse available. And while xeroxed work possessed a specific aesthetic, the more pervasive artistic gift was its sense of possibility. The copy's ubiquitous presence and inherent malleability subconsciously reduced the importance of the original.

The author paints a clear picture of an activist society in an age where actions were performed in public space instead of the more encapsulated environments of the present —we owe these beginnings to this specific time. And even without possessing a prior interest in copy machines, the selected circumstances in which xerography played a crucial and significant role make for a compelling and well-researched read.

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Note: This review gives the views of the author, and not the position of the LSE Review of Books blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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